

INTRODUCTIONS: first impressions are hard to change

Your introduction is your first chance to engage your reader, so it should be carefully considered and given extra attention during revision. A boring or lame introduction will turn readers off and damage your ethos. If a writer is too lazy and careless to attempt to interest an audience, the audience will rarely get past the first few lines before finding something more worthwhile to read. First impressions are difficult to change, so do your best to get make a good one.

An Effective Introduction Should...

- ✓ Focus the reader's attention on the topic
- ✓ Be inviting and entice the reader to continue reading; arouse the reader's curiosity
- ✓ State your thesis or indicate for your reader where the essay is headed.

NOTE: In academic essays, you want a clear thesis stated somewhere in the introduction; the essay, the longer it may take to arrive at your thesis. In an informal and/or personal essay, the thesis may be placed at almost any point in the essay as long as its purpose is clear throughout.

Some Things to Consider...

- ✓ Your first sentence is important: you want to begin with a "bang." A lame or boring first sentence leaves a bad impression and your reader might not want to continue reading.
- ✓ Consider your audience: *who* are your writing to/for? What kind of language is most appropriate for this audience? How direct do you want/need to be with readers? Are you presenting complex information or simple concepts (and therefore simple or complex words and sentences)?
- ✓ Consider your subject and attitude: what is your *approach* to the topic?—critical, serious, tongue-in-cheek (sarcastic), playful, concerned, etc.? Your introduction establishes your voice and tone right away, so you need to think about what kind of ethos you want to communicate. Make sure your introduction matches your approach to the topic and remains consistent.

Some Tips on Writing Your Introduction...

- Consider writing your introduction last.
- Don't be afraid to write a tentative introduction and then change it later.
- Pay special attention to your first and last sentences – say something useful and do it in an error-free way.
- Be straightforward, direct, and confident – assert your argument (thesis) confidently; you can't expect your reader to believe you if you don't sound like you believe yourself.

GOOD IMPRESSIONS: ideas for effective introductions

✓ **MEMORABLE QUOTATION** – This approach can be overused; some professors prefer that you don't begin an essay on somebody else's words. However, it can be very effective if you have an interesting, unique, or appropriate quotation. The quotation may relate directly to the subject or it may be only indirectly related (and thus require further explanation on your part). Do not force a quotation into this spot; if an appropriate quotation is not available, select another introduction strategy.

Natalie Goldberg once said, "I write because to form a word with your lips and tongue or to think a thing and dare to write it down so you can never take it back is the most powerful thing I know." Looking back, I have sometimes wished I could take my words back—that I could take myself back—to make more revisions before putting me and my message on display for all to see. But, even if second chances were possible, I'm not so confident that I wouldn't just relive and rewrite the same absurdities all over again. That's why writing requires courage and a sense of humor; it takes guts to put yourself out there despite the distinct possibility of looking like an idiot and it takes the ability to laugh at yourself to forgive yourself and remain confident.

✓ **CONCESSION** – Start with a statement recognizing an opinion or approach different from the one you plan to take in your essay; in other words, begin with an idea opposite to your own, other side(s) of the argument. (This is refutation.)

Participles. Prepositions. Predicates. I hear groans every time I begin my developmental writing class by announcing that today we will be discussing grammar. There are few subjects that elicit the inattention, distaste, and dread as this one. I admit, I once shared this hatred. But it doesn't have to be like this. Grammar doesn't have to be dull, uninteresting, methodical. With the right approach—humor—grammar can be anything but.

✓ **ANECDOTE, SHORT NARRATIVE, DESCRIPTION, INTRIGUING EXAMPLE** – Begin with a short, detailed account of a particular incident, event, object, location, person, example, etc. that is interesting, amusing, puzzling, or unexpected and is related to the topic of your paper.

I don't remember my parents reading me stories when I was a child. They must have, but those memories elude me now. My journey with words, as I remember it, began perched atop my grandfather's knees. Short knees, I used to call them. Grandpa was a heavy guy, so his lap wasn't the most spacious place to sit. But those knees had the power to take me on adventures in alternate realities.

✓ **AN INTERESTING FACT OR STATISTIC** – Begin with a surprising piece of information that you came across during your reading, research, and/or writing process that relates to your topic and grabs the reader's interest.

According to the National Survey of Homeless Assistance Providers and Clients, 23 percent of the total homeless population in the United States is veterans...

✓ **A QUESTION OR SEVERAL QUESTIONS** – Beware: this approach can also be overused. The thing to remember is that if you begin with a question, it should be interesting, thought-provoking, or insightful. Don't bother asking an obvious or meaningless question that the reader immediately knows the answer to. If you ask a question, make it a good one that inspires thought and that you plan to answer in your essay.

Who would have ever thought that in a nation bred in the computer age, born in the chat room, and weaned on spell-check, a book about proper punctuation could make the New York Times bestseller list? Lynn Truss's Eats, Shoots, & Leaves has done just that...

✓ **A DEFINITION OF A TERM IMPORTANT TO YOUR TOPIC AND ESSAY** – Avoid a simple dictionary definition. You may, however, want to define a term that in a surprising or unusual, new, and/or surprising way.

I'm a teacher. The word still feels awkward on my tongue and at my fingertips. T E A C H E R. A few months ago, a friend from college joked in an email, I just don't feel old enough or smart enough to be a teacher, do you? I remember this question just about every time I walk into my freshman writing classroom. I fear that I'll be found out. That they'll discover that I'm not really that smart or that old. That I'm no expert. That I'm still trying to figure it all out, just as they are. And that, really, I just like to write. And really, truly loving a subject is the only reason that anyone decides to be a teacher, not supposed expertise. I can think of many words and terms that more aptly describe what a teacher does and who a teacher is: explorer, learner, catalyst, information junkie, lover of experience. A teacher is someone for whom there is no "mastery" of any subject, there is only more...

✓ **A HISTORICAL COMPARISON OR RELATION TO CURRENT EVENTS** – Describe a historical or current event that relevant to your topic.

Celebrating the Revolution, French citizens sent King Louis XVI to the guillotine. Every Halloween day in ancient Rome, the most evil criminals were executed at the city square. In the 1800s, in an effort to deter crime in the United States, hundreds of bank robbers, killers, and horse thieves were hanged in public. Capital punishment has been a useful tool to protect justice and deter crime. However, in the last half of the 20th century, the death penalty has faced increasing opposition...

✓ **DESCRIBE A PROBLEM, DILEMMA, OR CONTROVERSY RELATED TO YOUR TOPIC**—Present your readers with something that is challenging and/or difficult to deal with, solve, or manage and *why* this is so.

Every year, millions of animals undergo painful suffering or death as a result of scientific research into the effects of drugs, food additives, cosmetics and other chemical products. While most people think animal testing is necessary, others are upset by what they see as needless suffering...

✓ **BACKGROUND INFORMATION** – Background information should be presented concisely and should be clearly related to your thesis. A rambling presentation of details only sort of related to your main point will confuse and bore your readers.

Einstein's Theory of Special Relativity and Theory of General Relativity reshaped the world of physics by contradicting the existing laws of motion proposed by Galileo and developed by Newton. Although Einstein faced great opposition when proposing his theories, his work reshaped the thinking of future generations of physicists.

✓ **AN ANALOGY** – An analogy is essentially just a comparison, but it differs from the tradition method of comparison in that an analogy compares two things that are very dissimilar. Analogies are usually used to help a writer make a complex idea clear to readers by comparing something complicated to something simple. For example, the heart and a mechanical pump could be compared to help make the complicated biological processes and anatomy easier to understand by comparing it to something more familiar and basic.

The star of the show was attempting to cook a dinner from scratch. It was extravagant with different vegetables, sauces, appetizers and salads. Even though he had been cooking all day and was a few hours away from serving, it looked like he hadn't even started. What amazed me was at one point he had both pots and pans on the elements and something in the oven. He was focusing his concern on only this, as this was the most critical part of cooking the meal. As you can imagine with silly sitcom hi-jinx he was adding the wrong ingredients together with putting them at the wrong temperature with humorous results (or at least the laugh track thought so). But he seemed to focus on the easy tasks like adding an ingredient to one pot while looking at the pan to it's left and saying "I don't know about that one". So in misunderstanding what is going on in the left pan he sticks with the familiar adding of taste by way of salt and pepper to the pot. This adds to the humor, as when he is done and serving he can't even identify the potato that he started with now dark crispy round pucks. However the gravy that he spent his time on was superb tasting, they did not have any potatoes to compliment with.

This is much like my problem, as I also only want to be concerned with what I am good at or what I enjoy. My gravy is English, History and Audio/Visual. My bitter tasting accompaniment is Math, Science and Physics. My dinner guest is university and I am cooking to impress them. If they enjoy this meal I will cook again this time only the stuff I like. I love to cook but only what I love to relish in.

BAD IMPRESSIONS: introductions to avoid

✗ **THE OVERDONE & ILLOGICAL "TRUTH"** – When an obvious fact is presented in overly fancy and emphatic language, making it seem more important than it is, presents it in an exaggerated way, and/or unrealistically and falsely claims a truth.

Down through history, from Eve to Joan of Arc, from Cleopatra to Eleanor Roosevelt, we find that women have provided inspiration for men and molded their lives, their efforts, and their destinies. For the love of women, men have robbed, murdered, pillaged, gained riches, and gained greatness. Without women, life would have no purpose, no meaning...

✗ **THE COMPLAINT OR APOLOGY** – When a student whines about the about the difficulties of writing on the assigned subject or makes a personal apology to the instructor for work poorly done.

Who am I? This question is quite a difficult problem to analyze, even though it looks quite simple at a glance.... Not many students take the viewpoint that I take, so I guess I will try to give an analysis of myself. / After searching vainly for a subject on which to write which would be related to the assignment, I came to the conclusion that everything I considered as a possible theme had been pretty well 'hashed over' in class. Therefore, I gave up and succumbed to a desire I've had since very early in this course – to write about my personal experience with video games. I'm sure you've read about this topic many times before, so I regret to yet again bore you to death.

✗ THE DICTIONARY DEFINITION – When the paper begins by giving the dictionary definition of one or more of the words in the assigned question. Anyone can look up a word in the dictionary; it may be far more interesting to define what a word or term means to you in the context of the assignment (an unusual definition). The dictionary introduction is also considered lazy and uninteresting because teachers have seen it thousands of times. Even in a definition paper, you can begin in a more interesting way than *simply* providing a dictionary definition. Get creative!

Before entering into a discussion of the wit of Oscar Wilde as displayed in The Importance of Being Earnest, it is first necessary to ask ourselves: what do we mean by wit? Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary defines wit as being.... / Webster's dictionary defines slavery as "the state of being a slave," as "the practice of owning slaves," and as "a condition of hard work and subjection.

✗ FACTS NO ONE NEEDS TO BE REMINDED OF – When the paper begins with common, obvious knowledge that is pointless to mention because everyone knows it already.

John F. Kennedy, who served as president of the United States....; February 14th is widely recognized as a day of love, or St. Valentine's Day...

✗ EXCUSES OR CONFESSIONS OF THE WRITER'S INSECURITY OR LACK OF KNOWLEDGE ABOUT THE TOPIC—When a writer admits major weaknesses, lack of skill, or absence of knowledge or when a writer blames his/her incompetence on something or someone else, presenting himself/herself as a helpless victim.

Ricardo's economic theories are extremely difficult to explain, but I will do the best I can...; I have no idea what the author's message was because I'm a terrible reader and stink at English...; I'm sure I'll make a fool of myself trying to explain this concept because high school taught me next to nothing, so my ideas are probably pretty stupid because my teachers were lazy...

✗ AN ANNOUNCEMENT OF THE CONTENT OF THE ESSAY—When writer simply announces what he/she will do (write about). This is unnecessary and redundant; don't tell you reader what you will do—just do it. Also, you don't need to tell your reader that the ideas are yours (*I think that, I believe, in my opinion, etc.*); if it's your essay then the ideas quite obviously belong to you.

In this paper, I will explain..., In this paper, I will talk about..., This paper will discuss..., etc; This essay will consider the development of humor in American...; My thesis is. . ; I think/believe...; In my opinion...

✗ THE PLACE HOLDER – This introduction also makes broad, vague statements about the topic that don't really communicate anything meaningful. These statements exist just to take up the "introduction space" in your paper. If you had something more effective to say, you would probably say it, but in the meantime this paragraph just holds the introduction place in your paper.

Slavery was one of the greatest tragedies in American history. There were many different aspects of slavery. Each created different kinds of problems for enslaved people.